

Busting the Icon

Restoring Balance to the Influence of Clausewitz

Phillip S. Meilinger

If you train a man for war alone you are automatically training him for murder; but if you claim, in all sincerity, that you are training him to preserve peace you must train him to be a human being.

—Col-Gen Klaus Kahlenberge¹

MANY US military thinkers and practitioners have embraced a view of war that is out of touch with current circumstances—and, consequently, dangerous. This has a direct effect on the present global war on terror that is focused largely on Islamic extremists. There are two main problems. First, US military leaders—especially in the ground forces—continue to view war as a climactic, and usually bloody, clash of arms. “Muddy boots and bloody bayonets” and “occupation of territory” are the liturgies of these people, a maxim that current operations in Iraq against Muslim terrorists have shown to be increasingly bankrupt. In addition, the American military is culturally tone deaf. It does not sufficiently take into account the fundamentally distinct traditions, mores, behaviors, and beliefs of the people that we deal with around the world—especially those in Asia and the Middle East. These are not new problems, and the root of the military’s myopia is the continued infatuation with the ground-centric and Euro-centric ideas of Carl von Clausewitz.



Clausewitz has become an icon among military officers of all the services, and his ideas are taught in every war college, staff college, and service academy in the country. It is common for a military writer or briefer to begin or end an argument with a quote from Clausewitz, presumably lending the author/speaker an aura of credibility.

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We need to broaden our thinking. Clausewitz was a Prussian general who fought in the Napoleonic wars two centuries ago. Afterwards, he served as the director of the Prussian War Academy, where he wrote a number of historical and theoretical books. His most notable work was *On War*, universally considered the classic study of war.

There are several concepts that Clausewitz is justifiably famous for articulating. He warned all political and military leaders to understand first and foremost the kind of war upon which they were embarking. He stressed the importance of knowing in advance precisely what they wanted to achieve and how much they were willing to pay in blood and treasure to obtain it. At the same time, however, attempting to plan out exactly how a war or campaign would unfold was ludicrous. Nothing ever worked as intended. *Fog*—the unknowns and unknowables of the future; *friction*—the thousand little breakages, delays, and misunderstandings that impede and bedevil all activities; and *chance*—fate or luck, both good and bad, which crops up unexpectedly: all of these meant that it was impossible to plan a war strategy scientifically. (Paradoxically, military planners must nonetheless attempt to identify these imponderables and take them into account.)

Clausewitz also stressed the importance of psychological factors in war. He had just witnessed nationalistic wars and an outpouring of passion that had not been seen in Europe for generations. War had become a contest between peoples, not just princes. To help explain this phenomenon, he used the metaphor of a “remarkable trinity”—society (passion or “natural force”), the military (chance and probabilities), and a country’s government (reason)—that constantly interacted during the course of a war. It was necessary for a state to keep these three forces in some type of equilibrium.² Finally, Clausewitz emphasized the importance of focused energy. Commanders have many priorities to choose from when beginning a campaign. Therefore, it is essential that they think through the process of cause and effect: political objectives lead to military strategy which, in turn, leads to specific tasks/targets to be affected, struck, or neutralized.

These were not new ideas. But Clausewitz was seminal because he was the first to examine them rigorously and at length. There is a special value in being able to take ideas that have been circulating in the ether, analyze them, and then explain them to others. Clausewitz did that, and he did so quite well.

Still, *On War* is a difficult read, partly because it has come down to us as a work in progress. Only the first chapter of the first book (of a total of 125 chapters comprising eight books) did Clausewitz himself consider complete.

In truth, the unusual style (for us today) in which he wrote helps compound the confusion. In a format used by his countryman, the philosopher Immanuel Kant, Clausewitz began with a paradigm, in this case, of *ideal war*—war on paper. The ideal war tends to move towards the *absolute*, what today we might term *total war*. After describing this paradigm, he moved on, using what has been termed a *dialectic approach*—he contrasted this ideal war to that which actually occurs in practice. *Real war* is moderated by political goals, resources, chance, friction, and all the other impediments that affect war as it unfolds in the actual event. Yet, the wars that shaped Clausewitz's views were those of the Napoleonic era in which he was a participant. Those wars were as close to absolute—in their objectives sought and the means employed—as Europe had seen in nearly two centuries, and Clausewitz admitted that warfare “had assumed the absolute state under Bonaparte.”³ In other words, during his era real war was quite close to absolute war—theory and reality converged. Consequently, the historical examples he used throughout *On War* invariably relate to those absolute wars.⁴ This factor colors how readers have interpreted Clausewitz over the decades.

The unusual dialectic approach used in *On War* has prompted commentators ever since to warn uninitiated readers that these opening pages are snares to be approached warily. Clausewitz's first chapter reads almost like a list of “topic sentences” for the 600 or so pages to follow and also contains some of his most pithy and quotable lines: “War is thus an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will”; “In war the result is never final”; “Defense is a stronger form of fighting than attack”; and “War is a pulsation of violence.” The temptation to seize on these relatively polished and readable pages without absorbing the vast explanatory material behind them has caused no end of confusion.

It gets worse. In notes written a few years before his death, Clausewitz confessed that he had lately come to view his work in a totally new light. He believed that two themes, which he had largely overlooked until then, should now dominate his work. The first concerned what some have labeled the “dual nature” of war—the fact that some wars were fought “to overthrow the enemy” while others sought merely to occupy a border province to use as a bargaining chip at the peace table. That is, he wanted to distinguish

between the absolute wars of his own era and the limited wars that had been the norm for much of the previous 2,000 years. The second theme to be stressed was the inherently political nature of war. Clausewitz wrote that he had introduced these two themes in book 1, chapter 1, and had sketched them out in more detail in the concluding book 8, but—and this is important—he would need to rewrite virtually everything (except presumably that very first chapter) in order to explain fully these two new foci.⁵

He died before completing those revisions. Nonetheless, one year later his widow published the unfinished manuscript. The fact that the bulk of this tome is a rough draft helps explain its numerous contradictions and redundancies—as well as the fact that the two new themes that he wanted to stress are largely missing from the body of the book.⁶ The inevitable result of these omissions has been for commentators ever since to extrapolate—or imagine—what Clausewitz would/should have written had he been given the chance.

In addition, Clausewitz wrote in an academic form of German that has made translation into English difficult. It is illustrative that the several English translations of *On War* appearing over the past 130 or so years read quite differently. Which of them captures the true spirit and intent of the original? Moreover, there is even doubt as to the actual wording of Clausewitz's original manuscript. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, the editors and translators of the latest version of *On War*, state that German editors in the 1850s introduced "several hundred alterations of the text" to the first edition of 1832—which itself was riddled with "obscurities perhaps inevitable in the posthumous publication of so large and complex a work by a devoted but inexpert widow."⁷ To resolve some of these competing interpretations, Howard and Paret took an approach that, frankly, should give any serious reader pause, stating that "we have based our work on the first edition of 1832, supplemented by the annotated German text published by Prof. Werner Hahlweg in 1952, except where obscurities in the original edition—which Clausewitz himself never reviewed—made it seem advisable to accept later emendations."⁸ Unfortunately, Clausewitz's handwritten manuscript—which Hahlweg had presumably consulted for his own edition—disappeared during World War II, so we cannot now compare it with current variants. The result is a degree of confusion as to what it is, precisely, that Clausewitz was trying to tell us nearly two centuries ago. There is, of course, even more debate and confusion regarding what Clausewitz actually *meant*.

Other concerns should trouble modern readers. Nearly half of *On War* is now of little use. Most of books 5–7 deal with tactical maneuvers and such topics

as organization, marches, camps, and defending mountain passes or swamps. There are also major gaps that observers have noted for decades—his neglect of technology, his failure to discuss sea power, and his disdain for intelligence.

The omission of technology is almost understandable—the Napoleonic wars in which he participated were virtually devoid of technological advances. Armies of his era were little different in their weapons and equipment than those of Frederick the Great 50 years earlier. In fact, the Napoleonic era was unique in that it epitomized a *revolution in military affairs* (to use the modern term) that did *not* include rapid technological change as one of its key components.⁹ Even so, a man supposedly writing for the future (which he claimed he was doing) should have included such a profoundly important topic in his major work. Clausewitz was, after all, a historian, and he well knew of instances where technology had altered the course of war and strategy in centuries past.

Clausewitz's neglect of sea power is even less excusable. The role played by the Royal Navy and its utter dominance of the seas had a major effect on Napoléon's empire. Clausewitz must have known that. More importantly, in his extended study of war strategy, it is remarkable that he would not discuss a form of war that is so different from war on land regarding its nature, objectives, and methods. As Sir Julian Corbett wrote in 1911, "The object of naval warfare is the control of communications, and not, as in land warfare, the conquest of territory. The difference is fundamental."¹⁰ It is indeed; and so is air warfare different from either. As we shall see, Clausewitz's unfaltering focus on land warfare has led to a distorted view of strategy that impacts our current military operations.

His neglect of intelligence is usually passed off as being a simple anachronism that is inconsequential—which seems like a stretch. Even granting this, however, there are other criticisms more close at hand and even more fundamental.



In the aftermath of World War I, many military theorists, notably Basil H. Liddell Hart, were critical of what they saw as the baleful influence of Clausewitz. Liddell Hart referred to him as the "Mahdi of mass and mutual massacre" whose belief in the necessity of slaughter led to the hecatomb of the Great War.¹¹ Others agreed with Liddell Hart to the extent that it was standard practice among military historians and theorists to interpret Clausewitz as advocating climactic and bloody battles.¹² It is not hard to see why readers took this interpretation—and still do. In book 4 ("The Engagement"), Clausewitz lists what he terms five "unequivocal statements" regarding war:

1. Destruction of the enemy forces is the overriding principle of war, and, so far as positive action is concerned, the principal way to achieve our object.
2. Such destruction of forces can *usually* be accomplished only by fighting.
3. Only major engagements involving all forces lead to major success.
4. The greatest successes are obtained where all engagements coalesce into one great battle.
5. Only in a great battle does the commander-in-chief control operations in person; it is only natural that he should prefer to entrust the direction of the battle to himself.¹³ (emphasis in original)

These are dogmatic statements; indeed, they are unequivocal statements. Is it possible there is a contextual confusion here? No. The only hint of moderation is the word “usually” in statement two. Yet, a few paragraphs later when Clausewitz discusses the unusual situation where victory can be achieved without the destruction of the enemy army, he treats it with disdain. In oft-quoted lines, Clausewitz writes that commanders who have tried to achieve victory without battle are pursuing “nonsense.” Rather, “only great victories have paved the way for great results,” and he is “not interested in generals who win victories without bloodshed”; instead, he lauds those generals who “seek to crown their achievements by risking everything in decisive battle.” Clausewitz concluded this chapter by stressing again the “absolute necessity” of fighting the great battle. He reminds us that “it is the theorist’s most urgent task to dissipate such preconceived ideas”—namely that great battles are avoidable.¹⁴

Clausewitz does in places refer to other methods besides fighting to achieve one’s objectives. In one intriguing passage he opined that it is possible for some operations to have “direct political repercussions” that may disrupt or paralyze an alliance or favorably affect the political scene.¹⁵ However, he gives no examples of such operations, so one wonders if such hints and caveats were mere lip service: war is so unpredictable that any manner of unusual things may occur—perhaps even victory without bloodshed. But when settling down to the serious business of instructing his readers on how to actually *conduct* war, such aberrations are not even worthy of discussion.¹⁶

Although it is true that Clausewitz wanted to emphasize the “dual nature” of war in a future revision, he seemed to be referring largely to *objectives*. In other words, some wars may be fought for limited objectives—merely to

detach a province from a neighbor, such as Frederick's First Silesian War of 1740. As for the *means* used to achieve those objectives, limited wars might involve a lesser degree of strength and resources, but Clausewitz argued that even those more limited means should be directed toward a single purpose: to use the utmost violence to locate, engage, and destroy the enemy army. Why? The more total, and bloody, the climactic battle would be, the quicker the war would be over, the easier would be the resulting occupation of enemy territory, and the more decisive would be the overall result. Battle must be "a fight to the finish." As Clausewitz phrased it, "Our discussion has shown that while in war many different roads can lead to the goal, to the attainment of the political objective, fighting is the only possible means. Everything is governed by a supreme law, the *decision by force of arms*" (emphasis in original).¹⁷

Perhaps Clausewitz would have introduced a degree of moderation in later revisions—his references to politics impacting *all* aspects of war are interesting—but the version of *On War* we now possess shows very little ambiguity.

Noted below are 20 statements (emphasis in original in all cases) from *On War* regarding the necessity of decisive and violent battle—there are many more.

It follows, then, that to overcome the enemy, or disarm him—call it what you will—must always be the aim of warfare. (p. 77)

The fighting forces must be *destroyed*: that is, they must be *put in such a condition that they can no longer carry on the fight*. (p. 90)

If we wish to gain total victory, then the destruction of his armed forces is the most appropriate action and the occupation of his territory only a consequence. (p. 92)

Since in the engagement everything is concentrated on the destruction of the enemy, or rather of *his armed forces*, which is inherent in its very concept, it follows that the destruction of the enemy's forces is always the means by which the purpose of the engagement is achieved. (p. 95)

It follows that the destruction of the enemy's force underlies all military actions; all plans are ultimately based on it, resting on it like an arch on its abutment. (p. 97)

Thus it is evident that destruction of the enemy forces is always the superior, more effective means, with which others cannot compete. (p. 97)

To sum up: of all the possible aims in war, the destruction of the enemy's armed forces always appears as the highest. (p. 99)

What do we mean by the defeat of the enemy? Simply the destruction of his forces, whether by death, injury, or any other means—either completely or enough to make him stop fighting. (p. 227)

We do claim, however, that direct annihilation of the enemy's forces must always be the *dominant consideration*. We simply want to establish this dominance of the destructive principle. (p. 228)

Later, we will show how we shall apply the principle that the destruction of enemy forces must be regarded as the main objective; not just in the war generally, but in each individual engagement and within all the different conditions necessitated by the circumstances out of which the war has arisen. (p. 229)

In the previous chapter we defined the purpose of the engagement as being the destruction of the enemy. We have tried to prove this to be true in the majority of cases and in major actions, since the destruction of the enemy's forces must always be the dominant consideration in war. (p. 230)

The destruction of the enemy's forces is admittedly the purpose of all engagements. (p. 236)

But since the essence of war is fighting, and since the battle is the fight of the main force, the battle must always be considered as the true center of gravity of the war. All in all, therefore, its distinguishing feature is that, more than any other type of action, battle exists for its own sake alone. (p. 248)

The major battle is therefore to be regarded as concentrated war, as the center of gravity of the entire conflict or campaign. (p. 258)

Battle is the bloodiest solution. . . . It is always true that the character of battle, like its name, is slaughter [*schlact*], and its price is blood. (p. 259)

Even if a battle were not the primary, the most common, the most effective means of reaching a decision (as we think we have already shown more than once) the mere fact that it is one of the means of obtaining a decision should be enough to call for the *utmost possible concentration of strength* permissible under the circumstances. (p. 489)

In war, the subjugation of the enemy is the end, and the destruction of his fighting forces the means. That applies to attack and defense alike. (p. 526)

We ended up with the conclusion that the grand objective of all military action is to overthrow the enemy—which means destroying his armed forces. (p. 577)

Basing our comments on general experience, the acts we consider most important for the defeat of the enemy are the following: 1. Destruction of his army, if it is at all significant. (p. 596)

Whatever the final act may turn on in any given case, the beginning is invariably the same—annihilation of the enemy's armed forces, which implies a major victory and their actual destruction. The earlier this victory can be sought—that is, the nearer to our frontiers—the *easier* it will be. (p. 624)

Given the relentless hammering of this point throughout *On War*, is it any wonder that men like Ferdinand Foch and Erich Ludendorff—who professed to be disciples of Clausewitz—took their intellectual mentor at his word and during the Great War strove to achieve the “slaughter” he thought essential, and that “the name of Clausewitz became associated in the popular mind with battle and blood”?¹⁸ Liddell Hart's virulent rejection of Clausewitz thus becomes understandable. Today, it is common to dismiss the British thinker, and others of his ilk, as having been so overcome by the horrors of World War I that he simply misunderstood (perhaps deliberately) the true meaning of Clausewitz.¹⁹ This is indeed possible. It is also possible that Foch and Ludendorff were dullards and they, too, misunderstood the real meaning of the “master.”

In fact, various commentators on Clausewitz have listed a host of incompetents who repeatedly misread and misunderstood Clausewitz. The great German military historian Hans Delbrück argued that *virtually the entire* German General Staff, from Helmuth von Moltke the Elder through World War I, had tragically and totally misinterpreted Clausewitz regarding the necessity of a bloody and violent battle.²⁰ More recent commentators have echoed Delbrück's verdict regarding the German officer corps as well as a host of other unworthies such as Antoine-Henri Jomini, Douglas Haig, Ludwick Beck,

Hans von Seeckt, Klaus Reinhardt, John McAuley Palmer, Douglas MacArthur, Maxwell Taylor, and William Westmoreland—as well as noted military practitioners, thinkers, and historians like G. F. R. Henderson, V. I. Lenin, T. E. Lawrence, J. F. C. Fuller, Liddell Hart, Hoffman Nickerson, Edward Luttwak, Raymond Aron, Peter Paret, Russell Weigley, Martin van Creveld, and John Keegan.²¹ One admirer simply dismisses all those who disagree with Clausewitz—or rather his interpretation of Clausewitz—as “second-rate soldiers and third-rate intellectuals.”²²

The charges of one acolyte border on the bizarre. Army colonel Harry Summers wrote a book on the Vietnam War that purported to view the conflict through a Clausewitzian perspective—he quotes him copiously throughout. Summers argued that Pres. Lyndon Johnson and Congress were at fault for not following the Prussian general’s dictum regarding the need to gain the support of the populace before embarking on war. The US Army high command—especially Generals Taylor, Westmoreland, and Earle Wheeler—were also to blame for not recognizing the true nature of the war and conveying that information to their civilians leaders—who were similarly clueless. To Summers, the Vietnam War was a conventional war; misinformed leaders in and out of uniform were duped into thinking that the conflict was about guerrillas and counterinsurgency. Rubbish. Had we sent in more troops to fight a conventional war against the North Vietnamese regulars—perhaps invade Laos and Cambodia if North Vietnam were off-limits—and fight the decisive Clausewitzian battle prescribed in *On War*, we would have been more successful. Indeed, it appears that everyone in America had failed to get the memo on Clausewitz—except Summers himself.²³

Taken together, these are remarkably pompous and hubristic accusations. We are to believe that *generations* of men—men with lifetimes of military experience; men who commanded great armies in great battles, often successfully; men who fought in large wars and small; men of intelligence, culture, and learning—all misinterpreted Clausewitz and did so in such remarkably diverse ways.²⁴ Is it really credible to assert that they were all so puerile and thick that they did not understand Clausewitz? Is it not even more presumptuous to believe that academics, scholars, and military officers today have succeeded in solving his mysteries when so many others have failed in decades past?²⁵ If so many military commanders and thinkers have misunderstood the “true meaning” of Clausewitz, then perhaps it is because he is incapable of being understood.

There is another interpretation; namely, that Clausewitz meant what he said regarding the primacy of slaughter in war, and therefore von Moltke, Foch, Ludendorff, Liddell Hart, Westmoreland, and others were indeed interpreting Clausewitz correctly, and it is modern theorists who misunderstand. Such a view appears to be embarrassing to many of Clausewitz's admirers, but in truth, to Clausewitz, decisive battles were the part and parcel of war. After all, he had lived through the Napoleonic wars and written at length on the wars of Frederick the Great. Fighting major battles made those eras important and different from what had gone before, and that is why Clausewitz emphasized them. Michael Howard summed up the issue simply, stating that "no one who experienced Napoleonic warfare could have quarreled with his [Clausewitz's] statement 'the character of battle is slaughter.'"²⁶

But now one must seriously question whether it is either necessary or desirable to fight such battles. They are not only dangerous and potentially bloody—reasons enough to deter their occurrence—but modern Western societies now seem to require that war be bloodless, not only to ourselves, but also to our enemies. We must now minimize casualties to both sides in conflict. Limiting NATO casualties was a major concern to Gen Wesley Clark during the war against Serbia in 1999, or so he was told by his political masters.²⁷ Ominously, the mounting US death toll in Iraq corresponds to the fall in popular support among the American people.²⁸ As for collateral damage, the news media and their mobile satellite uplinks are ever present where our forces fight, and that media will highlight every bomb or artillery shell that falls short and every rifle bullet that kills an innocent bystander at a roadblock—to say nothing of egregious blunders like Abu Ghraib and the Haditha massacre. Such events can seriously undermine US foreign policy; hence, the extreme emphasis now placed on limiting collateral damage in all of our military operations.²⁹



Ironically, despite the protestations of modern readers, the average American ground officer nonetheless believes that the key to war is bloody and decisive battle, and that such engagements are not only necessary but also are desirable. This bias may, in turn, cause commanders to reject or overlook strategies that are not dependent on coming to grips with enemy ground forces in a major fight—was the failed and bloody Operation Anaconda in Afghanistan, an operation insisted upon and planned by ground officers,

really necessary? As noted previously, Sailors have differing views on how best to defeat an enemy. Similarly, Airmen have traditionally sought victory by alternative methods. These service-specific cultural views on war and strategy necessarily shape how commanders approach the crucial issue of campaign planning.

To illustrate how service culture plays an important role in strategy, let us review Clausewitz's use of the term *center of gravity* (COG). He implies that the COG is a crucial aspect of the enemy—"the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends"—that must be neutralized or destroyed. As we have seen, in most instances, he identified the enemy's army as the COG, although other possibilities could be the enemy's capital or an alliance. However, since a capital could usually be occupied only after the army defending it had been destroyed, the commander's strategy changed little—find and annihilate the enemy army first. Similarly, the most plausible way for a military commander to drive a country out of an alliance was to destroy its army; once again, the strategic focus left the commander little room for maneuver. As Clausewitz phrased it, "Still, no matter what the central feature of the enemy's power may be—the point on which your efforts must converge—the defeat and destruction of his fighting force remains the best way to begin, and in every case will be a very significant feature of the campaign."³⁰

One of the US Army's foremost historians of World War II, Martin Blumenson, stated authoritatively, "According to Clausewitz and common sense, an army in wartime succeeds by defeating the enemy army." Rejecting the "soft underbelly" argument and the need to work effectively within an alliance, he then went on to score Allied leadership for prolonging the war with its inefficient and diversionary attacks in North Africa, Sicily, and Italy; it should have "gone for the throat" and landed in France so as to destroy the *main* German army.³¹ Such ideas have not mellowed with age. After Desert Storm the US Army chief of staff stated peremptorily, "Achieving victory against an information-based state will entail destroying that country's armed forces, as well as its war-making capability."³² The following year he was even more emphatic, stating that "death and destruction remain the coins of war's realm, and no amount of technology or euphemistic labels will alter their weight. As much as one would like to think that simple solutions are possible, the reality is that wars are messy."³³

These types of inflexible pronouncements, inherited from Clausewitz, have become standard army theology, but what if the COG is defined not

as the enemy's strength—his army—but as his weakness or vulnerability? What if, as Sailors and Airmen believe, a country's industrial infrastructure, economy, transportation network, or leadership is the key center of gravity? In other words, it is quite possible that a Soldier, Sailor, or Airman could look at the same country and yet disagree on the identity of the key strategic focus—their conclusions drawn as a result of unique service cultures that viewed war through different prisms. The designation of a different COG thus would shape a campaign's strategy, weapons, force structure, targets, logistics preparations, and even tactics.

The possibility for such service-specific and one-dimensional thinking regarding the most effective and efficient strategy for overcoming an adversary is illustrated by the doctrinal thinking of the US Army. Field Manual 1, *The Army*, for example, states boldly:

Offensive operations carry the fight to the enemy by closing with and destroying enemy forces, seizing territory and vital resources, and imposing the commander's will on the enemy. They focus on seizing, retaining, and exploiting the initiative. This active imposition of landpower makes the offense the decisive type of military operation, whether undertaken against irregular forces or the armed forces of a nation state. In addition, the physical presence of land forces and their credible ability to conduct offensive operations enable the unimpeded conduct of stability and reconstruction operations.³⁴ (emphasis in original)

This appears much like a paraphrase from *On War* without the now politically-incorrect references to violence and slaughter. In US Army Field Manual 3-0, *Operations*, this belief in the necessity and desirability of close combat is reiterated: "Land combat continues to be the salient feature of conflict. It usually involves destroying or defeating enemy forces or taking land objectives that reduce the enemy's effectiveness or will to fight."³⁵

Marines have a similar view of war—although they seldom find themselves burdened with a need to be politically correct. In Fleet Marine Force Manual 1, *Warfighting*, they, too, paraphrase *On War* to educate their troops on the nature of war:

The means of war is force, applied in the form of organized violence. It is through the use of violence—or the credible threat of violence, which requires the apparent willingness to use it—that we compel our enemy to do our will. In either event, violence is an essential element of war, and its immediate result is bloodshed, destruction, and suffering. While the magnitude of violence may vary with the object and means of war, the violent essence of war will never change. Any study of war that neglects this characteristic is misleading and incomplete.³⁶

Such thoughts have obviously been internalized by Soldiers and Marines. Indeed, one of the US Army's intellectual luminaries is Ralph Peters, a retired lieutenant colonel, devoted admirer of Clausewitz, and author of "19 books and hundreds of essays and articles." In an astonishing essay, "In Praise of Attrition," published in the Army's leading professional journal, Peters defends the notion of slaughter and thinks there should have been more of it in Iraq. Echoing the words of Clausewitz, he too wants to hear nothing of generals who would attempt to make war without bloodshed. Instead, Peters tells us that the entire object of war is killing: "There is no substitute for shedding the enemy's blood." He advises commanders that they should "focus on killing the enemy. With fires. With maneuver. With sticks and stones and polyunsaturated fats."³⁷ How many others in uniform are infected with this unbridled lust for slaughter and a desire to throw as many of America's sons and daughters within range of enemy guns as possible? Can we attribute this bloodlust to an infatuation with Clausewitz?

It is illustrative of how deeply such beliefs have penetrated the military education system in the United States that the National War College, the nation's premier joint military school, emphasizes the Battle of Gettysburg—a battlefield tour is included in the curriculum. The focus is on glorifying a battle that included two of the bloodiest and most inane frontal assaults against a fortified position in US military history.³⁸ What are students—our future military leaders—expected to take from such examples?

In Korea, Vietnam, Desert Storm, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq, the theater commanders (in Vietnam the subtheater commander based in Saigon) were all Army officers. Was their strategic vision shaped by a mechanistic belief in the necessity for close combat—a belief inherited from Clausewitz that was expounded in their doctrine manuals, preached in their schools, and echoed in their professional journals?³⁹ Did General Westmoreland, for example, become so intent on finding, fixing, and destroying the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army—to the detriment of using political and economic tools to help win the hearts and minds of the populace—that he shaped all of his plans to that end, with disastrous results? Another Army officer, Lt Col Andrew Krepinevich, thought so and criticized his service and its leaders for not being better attuned to the political aspects of the war that emphasized civil-action programs—programs that could achieve objectives without the "body counts" advocated by Westmoreland.⁴⁰

It is significant that in several of the conflicts just noted—Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and the operations in northern Iraq during 2003—diplomatic

considerations forestalled strategies that called for the introduction of sizable numbers of conventional US ground troops. The Army generals who were in overall command were therefore forced, fortunately, to improvise. The result was a series of operations that proved unusually successful—providing politically desirable results with a remarkably low casualty toll—to both sides.⁴¹ These notable campaigns relied primarily on airpower—both land and sea based—combined with special operations forces and indigenous ground forces, such as the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan, to achieve success.⁴² (Of interest, all of these examples of near-bloodless victories were ignored by Peters in the diatribe cited above.) This would indicate that in the modern era of standoff precision weapons, near-real-time command and control, pervasive sensor systems, and dominance in the mediums of air and space, alternative strategies for victory are indeed possible—and desirable.⁴³ Conversely, the continual turmoil and bloodshed evident in Iraq stability operations since 2003 highlight yet again the dangers inherent in close combat. In such a situation, the words of another noted strategic thinker, Niccolò Machiavelli, are eerily apposite: “The enmity of a defeated population in its home is more dangerous than its hostility on the battlefield.”⁴⁴

It is said that Gen Eric Shinseki was fired as Army chief of staff in 2003 because he advocated more troops on the ground in Iraq, and that was contrary to the Bush administration’s views on strategy.⁴⁵ Since then, Shinseki supporters, like Peters presumably, have lamented the fact that not enough of our ground troops are in place, and there is not enough killing going on as a consequence. Similarly, a number of retired Army and Marine Corps generals who were unequal to the task in Iraq have since blamed their civilian superiors for not sending in more ground troops.⁴⁶ But others have wondered if the opposite is not the case.⁴⁷ Echoing the words of Machiavelli, they ask if the US presence in Iraq is too large and provocative—and has been from the very beginning. Was there a better way to remove Saddam Hussein, disarm and pacify his army, and avoid prolonged guerrilla operations—fueled by thousands of foreigners drawn to the area just itching for a bloody battle with the American infidels occupying Iraq—than to send in tens of thousands of US ground troops?⁴⁸ Did the Clausewitzian focus on decisive battle and bloodshed so permeate the thinking of our military leadership that they viewed such strategies as the first and obvious choice rather than as a last resort?⁴⁹ If so, we are now paying a heavy price for such target fixation. If there is anything that four years in Iraq have taught us, it should be that destroying an enemy army and occupying its territory *do not* equal victory and are therefore not

the primary objectives of war. In fact, in some circumstances such activities become counterproductive. This seems especially the case in Islamic countries that resent, more than most, the presence of non-Muslims on their soil.

The conflicts that America now faces, and those she has experienced for much of the post–World War II era, have involved limited wars of counterinsurgency not anticipated by Clausewitz. Although he devotes one brief chapter to “the people in arms,” he surprisingly gives no examples from the most important insurgency of the Napoleonic era—that in Iberia. Such wars are fundamentally different than those seen firsthand by Clausewitz and which form the focus of his work. In fact, it is clear from his scanty coverage that he viewed such operations with skepticism. In his view, such armed resistance movements must be employed in conjunction with the main army in order to achieve useful results: “*Insurgent actions* are similar in character to all others fought by second-rate troops: they start out full of vigor and enthusiasm, but there is little level-headedness and tenacity in the long run” (emphasis in original).⁵⁰ Obviously, this disdainful description hardly reflects the reality of the Viet Cong or al-Qaeda. It appears that Clausewitz partially recognized his deficiencies in this area near the end of his life—at least to the extent that he understood wars could be limited—hence his statement that *On War* needed to be totally revised to accommodate this “dual nature” of war. But even that recognition gives no indication that he would have examined the unique aspects of what today we would term *revolutionary war*.⁵¹

And yet, modern-day students of Clausewitz insist that *On War* still teaches us about such wars. For those who would attempt to extract meat from these slim pickings, they would do well to remember the warning that Clausewitz himself offered: theory is a slender reed upon which to base a strategy. Only experience (history), properly analyzed, was the true barometer for measuring the validity of theory. Precious little “experience” is noted in the general’s writing on this new type of war to serve this critical analytical purpose. Therefore, any lessons derived from *On War* regarding modern revolutionary warfare are largely being imagined by hopeful readers searching for relevance where none exists.⁵²



The headline read “Rage over Cartoons Perplexes Denmark.” It was one in a long series of flare-ups between the Islamic world and the West.⁵³ The flap over cartoons depicting Mohammed published in a Danish newspaper—the outrage of Muslims and the resultant astonishment as to why they were

offended—was especially ironic because few would ever accuse the politically correct Danes of being culturally insensitive.

This incident was symptomatic: the West and Islam are not on the same sheet of music. We do not understand each other's most basic principles and motivations. To appreciate this dichotomy, simply contrast Muslim reactions to the cartoons—which were not offensive in content—to the frontal assault on Catholic theology engendered in such books/movies as *The Da Vinci Code*, which have elicited scarcely an organized protest from Catholics around the world—much less riots.⁵⁴ After all, freedom of speech is a basic human right—for Westerners. To Muslims, there are beliefs of a higher priority.⁵⁵

The second major problem with the writings of Clausewitz parallels this clash of civilizations. The US military is culturally tone-deaf. Despite lip service to the concept of understanding our enemy, we seldom bother to do so except in the narrowest military sense. Our intelligence analysts can tell us, often with good fidelity, the numbers and capabilities of the military equipment and force structure of the adversaries we may have to face. We have generally been far less effective, indeed profoundly so, in understanding the social values, traditions, and beliefs of those peoples. What were the Japanese thinking in December 1941? Didn't they realize what a sneak attack would do to rouse the sleeping giant? How could the North Vietnamese not understand the simple and elegant logic of gradual escalation and respond to it accordingly? And of course, the entire concept of suicide bombers—either kamikazes or Islamic fanatics—is so alien to our cultural mind-set as to be mystifying.⁵⁶

I attribute the myopia of America's military leaders regarding the importance of foreign culture and its influence on war and strategy in no small part to an overreliance on the writings of Clausewitz. The nut of the problem focuses on the issue of Clausewitz's most famous one-liner.

The problems of translation and a translator's bias, noted earlier, are issues that must be addressed here as well. In book 1, chapter 1, Clausewitz pens his most famous sentence: "War is merely the continuation of . . ." Of what? What specifically was it that he stated war was a continuation of? Clausewitz uses the word *politik* in a subtitle in chapter 1. When explaining that line in the paragraph that follows, his full sentences in German read, "Der Krieg ist eine blosse Fortsetzung der Politik mit andern Mitteln. So sehen wir also, das der Krieg nicht bloss ein politischer Akt, sondern ein wahres politisches Instrument ist, eine Forsetzung des politischen Verkehrs, ein Durchfuhren desselben mit anderen Mitteln." That second explanatory sentence has been translated in a number of ways (emphasis added):

War is . . . a continuation of *political commerce* . . . by other means.
—Graham and Rapoport

War is . . . a continuation of *political intercourse* . . . by other means.
—Jolles

War is . . . a continuation of *political activity* . . . by other means.
—Paret

War is . . . a continuation of *politics* by other means.
—Paret

War is . . . a continuation of *policy* by other means.
—Pilcher

War is . . . only a continuation of *political methods with* an intermixture of other means.
—Maguire

War is a continuation of *diplomacy* intermingled *with* other means.
—Craig⁵⁷

Words are important things. They can mean different things to different people in different circumstances. In English, words such as *policy*, *politics*, *political intercourse*, and *diplomacy* all have varying definitions and usages. *Policy*, for example, often has a negative, bureaucratic connotation (“Sorry, it’s company policy.”); while *politics* often carries with it the baggage of unsavory backroom deals (“It’s all just politics.”). *Diplomacy* is the stuff of the State Department and foreign, not domestic, affairs. Which of these connotations—or perhaps none of them or others not mentioned—did Clausewitz have in mind when he wrote nearly two centuries ago that war was an extension of *politik*?

The point is this. It is one thing to quote glibly Clausewitz’s most famous sentence; it is another to use that statement as a basis for national strategy. Yet, some would have us do so, even though we may have only the vaguest idea of what the general meant by it.

Those who criticize Clausewitz’s detractors and skeptics generally argue that they have taken too literally the “master’s” comments regarding the necessity of slaughter—while at the same time not taking literally enough his advice that combat was merely *one* instrument of policy at a commander’s disposal.



Nonetheless, we must still come to grips with Clausewitz's most noted principle. Is war a continuation of policy (the most common translation)? To many cultures it is not. Over two millennia ago Thucydides observed that man went to war for three possible reasons: fear, interest, or honor. The first two of these are reasonably straightforward and would elicit little disagreement. The last, however, is a different story. Men fight for honor. The implications of that assertion are great. Could one shoehorn such rationale for war into Clausewitz's admonition that war is (should be?) an instrument of policy?

The problem deepens because there are many other reasons why nations have chosen war. Although Clausewitz barely spoke of economics in *On War*, surely he must have realized the impact of Napoléon's Continental System on Europe and how that helped drive Russia towards war. The quest for access to trade and resources has often justified a nation's resort to force. Similarly, revenge and irredentism are common motives for war—ask the Palestinians, or for that matter the French after 1870. What of simple territorial aggrandizement? The wars of Frederick the Great and of German unification had at their root simple motives of greed—often dressed up in the more dignified dress of nationalism, or, in the American case, of “Manifest Destiny.” Ideology is also often cited as a legitimate policy rationalization for war. The Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese civil wars—for want of a better term—and the US response to them are recent examples of such ideologically based conflicts. And of course, there is the war on terror, with its roots buried deeply in religious antagonisms stretching back for centuries.

Are all of these to be considered matters of policy? Clausewitz defenders respond by defining the term *policy* so broadly that it includes factors such as economics, irredentism, domestic politics, religion, and revenge. Christopher Bassford, for example, defines policy as “rational action undertaken by an individual or group which already has power in order to use, maintain, and extend that power.”⁵⁸ Well, that certainly covers the waterfront—although it does ignore the terrorist threat facing us today by begging the questions of what is meant by “rational” or whether a terrorist “already has power.” Paret reinforces this conventional interpretation asserting that “in *On War*, Clausewitz proceeds on the assumption that governments would act rationally and represent the true interest of the state as best

they could.”⁵⁹ That is not a trivial assumption. Even so, although such interpretations may remove the contradiction with Thucydides, it is also tantamount to stating that nations go to war because, well, because they have decided to do so—which is hardly a useful insight.

In *A History of Warfare*, John Keegan argues instead—echoing Paret—that given Clausewitz’s experiences in the Napoleonic wars and his Eurocentric worldview of the early nineteenth century, he must have intended a narrower definition; namely, that war was an affair of states and that the decision to wage it was based on rational decisions regarding political issues and major state interests.⁶⁰ Using this interpretation, Keegan states flatly that Clausewitz was wrong: there were other reasons for war causation, specifically the cultural background and tradition of the belligerents. Such an explication certainly fits more neatly with the words of Thucydides, but, in turn, it denies the universality of Clausewitz that his admirers so trumpet.⁶¹

Clausewitz argued that “war is no pastime; it is no mere joy in daring and winning, no place for irresponsible enthusiasts.”⁶² Keegan thought otherwise, noting that numerous peoples in modern times—Cossacks, Samurai, Magyars, Vikings, American Plains Indians, Janissaries, and Mamelukes, to name some—have made war for distinctly cultural reasons that to Westerners often sound quaint, primitive, or nonsensical. In such societies war is virtually constant; without beginning or end it simply continues, as do hunting, farming, and procreating. War for them is a way of life. Although Clausewitz correctly recognized that war is the province of passion and emotion, Keegan goes further, arguing that these passions occur before conflict begins and often are the reasons for the war itself and the specific way in which it is conducted.

If we accept Keegan’s argument, then Clausewitz’s formulation of war being an instrument of policy therefore appears peculiarly “post-Westphalian” and Western European in focus, a focus that did not include such motivations as religion, ideology, or culture.⁶³

Unfortunately, over much of the past century America’s adversaries have been motivated by precisely these types of impulses. To give an example of how this can cause us difficulties, in April 2001 a Chinese F-8 fighter ran into a US Navy EP-3 patrol plane flying well off the Chinese coast. The fighter went down, and its pilot was killed. The EP-3 limped into a Chinese airfield on the island of Hainan, and its 24-man crew was immediately imprisoned. The Chinese reacted vociferously, accusing the United States of

spying and provocative acts; it stated that the EP-3 deliberately rammed its fighter.⁶⁴ The US reaction was surprise bordering on shock: the US ambassador labeled the Chinese response “inexplicable and unacceptable.” Why was China making an issue of what obviously was an accident prompted by an overzealous and not very capable Chinese fighter pilot?⁶⁵

It was expected that Chinese politicians would want to avoid confrontation with the United States: they had no desire to disrupt trade relations, their bid to host the 2008 Olympics, or to further inflame the Taiwan situation. The military, apparently, had other ideas. The military has traditionally wielded enormous influence in Chinese affairs, a situation that far predates the present communist regime. Until recently, the military even played a major role in the country’s domestic economy. Lately, however, the military has been losing ground, and it may have seen the collision as an opportunity to reassert its influence. Was all of this merely about “saving face” or trying to realign the political balance of power with the Chinese hierarchy? If so, then who was in charge in Beijing during April 2001? If it were the generals calling the shots because they were in an internal power struggle with Chinese civilian leaders, how could their actions—risking military confrontation with the United States over a trifle—be considered a rational act of policy?⁶⁶ It is not surprising we were confused by the “inexplicable” behavior of those inscrutable Orientals.

There is a cautionary tale here. Not only do other cultures have differing views on what constitutes rational acts of policy, but also the role of the military in their societies and the fundamental balance between civil and military affairs may be far different than our own—their “trinity” (if it exists at all) operates under laws and formulae we do not understand. We *assume* that the military will be subordinated—physically, ideologically, and legally—to civilian officials. That is how we in the West now do things—to ensure the militarists do not drive the ship of state. Much of the world finds such a hierarchy peculiar.

A related and fascinating interpretation of how biological factors affect war comes from Stephen Peter Rosen in his *War and Human Nature*. Rosen dives into psychological and physiological studies that examine human responses to various stimuli. One of his arguments is that *status* is a key element in human relations and that this element is present in groups as well as in individuals. Thus, status plays a key role in foreign policy as some countries, and their leaders, place a major role (even if unacknowledged) on perceived slights, snubs, or inequalities.

Of greater interest and perhaps importance, Rosen discusses the role of testosterone in human events. Testosterone is present in all humans, although its level varies greatly depending on age, sex, situational factors, and, critically, environment and culture. Basically, testosterone equals aggressiveness and “dominant behavior.” Although some would no doubt argue that stating testosterone affects male aggressiveness—witness teenage boys—is akin to noting that the sun tends to come up in the east, it *is* news to conclude that states and their leaders are similarly driven by such biological phenomenon. Rosen does indeed argue that some societies specifically cater to their more aggressive, macho elements, and it is these groups and individuals within their societies who tend to rise to the top. As he phrases it, “In plain language, some people, under specified conditions, are more likely to fight when challenged. Subjectively, they get satisfaction from subduing challengers apart from the rewards that others give to them. . . . Such people will tend to be high-testosterone men who are members of groups of high-testosterone men existing in unstable status hierarchies.”⁶⁷ Such societies tend to rely on tyrants to lead them. Characteristics of such tyrants include their urge to punish perceived challenges, unwillingness to coexist with rivals, rule by fear rather than by consensus, fostering the growth of yes-men in their immediate circle who are unwilling to tell them the truth, and greater interest in short-term gains/losses and prestige than in long-term calculations.⁶⁸ Does this sound familiar?

Another important aspect of this argument that affects our discussion is Rosen’s claim that such testosterone-prone societies and individuals react quickly, forcefully, and automatically to perceived slights and challenges. Consider Rosen’s assertion in light of present combat operations in Iraq. An insightful and devastating indictment of US military operations in Iraq is presented by Thomas Ricks in his book *Fiasco*. Ricks provides numerous examples of US troops going into areas, breaking down doors in the middle of the night, and then arresting and humiliating husbands and fathers in front of their families. In what Rosen would argue were testosterone-induced tactics, US Soldiers and Marines were attempting to overawe the populace and demonstrate American might and, hence, Iraqi impotence—it is an attempt to ensure passivity and compliance within the citizenry. The actual result, however, has been far different. Ricks has one sheikh complaining that although he wanted to support US efforts, “many of the arrests were done with a boot on the head, in front of the women. You’ve created a blood debt when you do that.”⁶⁹ In Ricks’s assessment, this aggressive conduct—that reflected a lack of understanding

of the cultural implications of US actions—actually *created and fueled* the insurgency. In other words, because of cultural and biological conditioning, Iraqi men, *more than most*, are outraged by such treatment, and their natural response is to seek revenge—regardless of logic or consequences—against the increased use of force and intimidation by US ground troops. The result is a vicious and escalating circle of violence by both sides.


The problem indicated by the above examples: American leaders have attempted to impose the limited Clausewitzian framework of a rational, policy-driven strategy on the wars they have fought; but their adversaries have not read the same book. They often have other reasons for waging war—reasons that to us are illogical, unworthy, or inexplicable.⁷⁰ As a result, we continually run the risk of mirror imaging. We hold in our minds a view of war—how and why it occurs and how it should be fought—that often has little to do with what our enemies are thinking. And so, we are repeatedly caught by surprise by the “irrational policy decisions” of others. It is little wonder that we have been so often stunned by the actions of our enemies, whether they were Muslim fanatics, Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Vietnamese, or Arab.



It is probably inevitable that my arguments will be rejected as just the latest in, to use Bassford’s wonderful phrase, “Clausewitz trashing.” Obviously, I just don’t get it. Besides the fact that if such were the case I would be in good and copious company, that line of reasoning would miss the mark. I am not advocating that we cease the study of *On War*. When one gets past the excess verbiage, Clausewitz is an intelligent, thoughtful, and insightful writer; more importantly, he is provocative—in the sense that he provokes the mind to think and challenge. For any military officer or civilian leader who seeks to understand the nature of military operations, that is a valuable attribute. But he is only one of many military thinkers from all services, mediums, nations, and cultures that is deserving of study. It is fruitless—indeed it is worse—to seek answers in Clausewitz or to compare others, always unfavorably, to him and his ideas. A study of Clausewitz should be seen as an intellectual exercise to train the mind and provide insights into the military profession. As noted at the beginning of this essay, Clausewitz’s discussions of fog and friction, the importance of defining objectives, the need to focus efforts, and the realization that “modern war” (to him) was primarily a test of wills, were and are valuable insights. It must always be remembered,

however, that *On War*, more so than most other books because of the redundancies, omissions, and inconsistencies already noted, should never be approached by anyone looking for answers. This is not a book of answers; rather, it is a book of questions.⁷¹

The concern centers on the nearly obsequious devotion to the writings of Clausewitz that expound the view that bloody battle is the essential feature of war and that the use of military force must conform to the rational policy decisions of state leaders. Such interpretations are hopelessly inadequate in the modern world. In fact, it is one of the many contradictions and confusions of Clausewitz that these two essential ideas are in opposition to one another. After all, can a decision for slaughter ever be construed as a rational act of policy? Which of these two principles are we to take most seriously?

Mistakes have been made in Iraq, and over 3,000 Americans have paid with their lives for those mistakes, as well as have tens of thousands of Iraqis. The Clausewitzian paradigm so hastily followed has proven disastrous. But the damage is largely done, and we must muddle through. The future has yet to be written, however. We now have an opportunity to move beyond the narrow, parochial, and crippling vision of war preached by Clausewitz. We must not allow future strategies to be dominated by foolish beliefs regarding the necessity of slaughter. We cannot afford a war of attrition with the terrorists, either physically or morally. We must find another way. Just as importantly, we must open our minds to the world around us. We must cease mirror imaging and expecting all cultures to think, act, and react as we do ourselves—as rational policy makers who see a resort to force as a calculated political decision. The epigraph beginning this essay uttered by the fictitious General Kahlenberge contains wisdom. If we train our military forces merely for war—to seek out and then fight bloody battles filled with slaughter—we are not training them to solve the problems that confront us. The global war on terrorism will not be won by such military leaders using such methods. We must broaden our vision of war. Busting the Clausewitzian icon that dominates our strategic thinking would be a good place to start the reeducation campaign. 

Notes

1. Kahlenberge was the fictional anti-Hitler general in Helmut Kirst's *The Night of the Generals*.
2. The "remarkable trinity" is a difficult concept to understand, leading some admirers to treat it as profound. For example: "But the continual twisting about that fills *On War* is not just a case of Clausewitz's being ponderous and wordy. Instead, the apparently irresolute to

and fro of his prose conforms fully to his metaphor of theory floating among competing points of attraction.” Alan Beyerchen, “Clausewitz, Nonlinearity, and the Unpredictability of War,” *International Security* 17, no. 3 (Winter 1992): 85. On the other hand, one observer sees it in theological terms, and, like the mystical “Holy Trinity” of Christian doctrine, Clausewitz did not intend it to be understood. Bruce Fleming, “Can Reading Clausewitz Save Us from Future Mistakes?” *Parameters* 34, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 67. Incidentally, some translations refer to a “wonderful” trinity.

3. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 580. Discussions of “total” or “absolute” war are certainly relative. Although the Napoleonic wars were far more total than those that had immediately preceded them, they were less total than either world war of the twentieth century.

4. Although there are scattered references to Charles XII, Hannibal, Turenne, and others in *On War*, the vast majority of Clausewitz’s historical examples refers to the operations of Frederick the Great or, especially, Napoléon.

5. Clausewitz wrote in 1827 that bks. 1–6 were “a rather formless mass that must be thoroughly reworked once more”; bk. 7 was a “rough draft”; and bk. 8 was a “rough working over of the raw material.” Clausewitz, *On War*, 68–69.

6. Azar Gat has argued that *On War* may actually be more finished than originally supposed—a not altogether comforting thought given its many inconsistencies and contradictions. See his *The Origins of Military Thought: From the Enlightenment to Clausewitz* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), appendix.

7. Clausewitz, *On War*, 608n. I would also point out that in a disturbing admission, Bernard Brodie stated in his introductory essay to this edition that the term *absolute war* is used far less “than others have in their translations” (47). Does this mean that the translators deliberately toned down Clausewitz’s prose to make it more palatable to our modern and sensitive ears? Or is Brodie claiming that earlier translators deliberately accentuated the brutality of Clausewitz’s prose? In either case, Brodie is telling us that *On War* is as much an *interpretation* as it is a translation.

8. *Ibid.*, xi.

9. The purist might argue that Napoléon benefited from, and improved upon, advancements made in a more mobile artillery arm. To my mind, however, that was a relatively minor advance.

10. Julian S. Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1988), 94. Actually, Clausewitz does make a single, oblique reference to naval tactics in bk. 3.

11. Basil H. Liddell Hart, *The Ghost of Napoléon* (London: Faber & Faber, 1933), 120. Liddell Hart had been an infantry officer in the Great War who was wounded at the Somme in 1916.

12. See for example, Hoffman Nickerson, *The Armed Horde, 1793–1939* (New York: Putnam’s, 1942); Lynn Montross, *War Through the Ages* (New York: Harper, 1944); John U. Nef, *War and Human Progress: An Essay on the Rise of Industrial Civilization* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952); Gordon Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956); R. Ernest and Trevor N. Dupuy, *The Military Heritage of America* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1956); Walter Goerlitz, *The German General Staff, 1657–1945* (New York: Praeger, 1966); Robin Higham, *The Military Intellectuals in Britain: 1918–1939* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1966); Russell Weigley, *The American Way of War* (New York: Macmillan, 1973); Larry H. Addington, *The Patterns of War since the Eighteenth Century* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984); and Brian Bond, *Pursuit of Victory: From Napoléon to Saddam Hussein* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). In a typical assessment,

Nickerson noted that Clausewitz advocated a form of war that entailed “the utmost violence and the most fearful sacrifices” (52).

13. Clausewitz, *On War*, 258.

14. Ibid., 259–60, 262. Also note that in bk. 1, chap. 1—the only chapter Clausewitz considered finished—he repeats with disgust his warning that “kind-hearted people may think there is some ingenious way to disarm or defeat an enemy without too much bloodshed . . . [but] it is a fallacy that must be exposed.” Ibid., 75.

15. Ibid., 92.

16. On several occasions Clausewitz notes the possibility of capturing territory, a prominent hill, or the enemy capital but then notes that the logical intent of such actions is to put oneself in a better position to destroy the enemy army. See pages 95–97 and 529 for his discussion.

17. Ibid., 99, 254. Paret states in his introductory essay to *On War* that “Clausewitz denied that limited aims justified a limitation of effort” (21). Michael Howard echoes this conclusion in his own introductory essay, stating: “There is no reason to suppose that Clausewitz would in his revision have abandoned any of the beliefs expressed in Book Four” (29). Azar Gat, who does not always agree with Howard and Paret, does so in this instance. See his *The Development of Military Thought: The Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 107.

18. Michael Howard, “The Influence of Clausewitz,” in Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Howard and Paret, 36. See the essay on Foch by Etienne Mantoux in Edward Mead Earle’s *Makers of Modern Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1944). When testifying after the war before the commission on responsibility for the war, Ludendorff stated flatly: “The German General Staff is based upon the teachings of the great war philosopher Clausewitz.” Maj-Gen Sir Frederic Maurice, *British Strategy: A Study of the Application of the Principles of War* (London: Constable, 1929), 45.

19. Christopher Bassford, “John Keegan and the Grand Tradition of Trashing Clausewitz: A Polemic,” *War in History* 1, no. 3 (November 1994): 319–36. Jack English, in his excellent work, *Marching through Chaos: The Descent of Armies in Theory and Practice* (New York: Praeger, 1996), chap. 2, argues implicitly that Great War generals were following Clausewitz’s advice to exert the utmost effort to destroy the enemy’s military forces, and this was a rational decision—until 1917. At that point, however, the generals should have recognized futility and fallen back on another of Clausewitz’s rules—to realize that policy dictated a change of strategy.

20. See Arden Bucholz, *Hans Delbrück and the German Military Establishment: War Images in Conflict* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1985), passim. Remember, these officers were reading/misreading the book in their native German, so at least the possibility of mistranslation was not an issue. On the other hand, Raymond Aron in *Clausewitz, Philosopher of War* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1985), chap. 10, argues that Delbrück was the one who was mistaken. Michael Howard also condemns von Moltke, von der Goltz, and Foch for their misunderstanding of Clausewitz in his introductory essay (30–32).

21. See, for example, Michael I. Handel, ed., *Clausewitz and Modern Strategy* (London: Frank Cass, 1986), passim. For MacArthur’s sins, see John W. Spanier, *The Truman-MacArthur Controversy and the Korean War* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1959); and Robert E. Osgood, *Limited War: The Challenge to American Security* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1957). Also of interest, one of the major criticisms of Gen Dwight Eisenhower’s strategic conduct during World War II was that he insisted on stopping at the Elbe River rather than moving on and occupying Berlin before the Soviets got there. Eisenhower, the future president, obviously did not understand that war is a political and not merely a military act.

22. Ralph Peters, in his review of Christopher Bassford's *Clausewitz in English: The Reception of Clausewitz in Britain and America, 1875–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). *Parameters* 24, no. 4 (Winter 1994/1995): 148.

23. Harry G. Summers Jr., *On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context* (Navato, CA: Presidio, 1982), passim but especially chap. 8. The slam on Maxwell Taylor—who had been the Army chief of staff, chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and then ambassador to South Vietnam—is especially peculiar because it was Taylor who emphasized repeatedly that war was a political instrument and that simple military action would never be enough in Vietnam. Ironically, one critique of Summers accuses *him* of misreading Clausewitz! Fleming, “Can Reading Clausewitz Save Us,” 65. Westmoreland was ambivalent about all of this in his memoirs, arguing both that more emphasis should have been placed on counterinsurgency operations *and* that the United States should have invaded North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Gen William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 410–14.

24. It is perhaps not coincidental that British military thinkers have tended to be critical of Clausewitz: the long tradition of reliance on the Royal Navy and its unique way of war, and the “indirect approach” on land, are both largely antithetical to the Clausewitzian emphasis on decisive and bloody battle.

25. The faculty instructor notes for teaching the lessons on Clausewitz at the National War College—prepared by an academic with no military experience—makes the outrageous assertion that if the instructors could get the students to understand the points made in these notes that “maybe they could be the first generation of leaders not to misinterpret the master.” Notes provided to author by a faculty member.

26. Michael Howard, *Clausewitz* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 46.

27. Gen Wesley K. Clark, *Waging Modern War: Bosnia, Kosovo, and the Future of Combat* (New York: Public Affairs, 2001), 183.

28. To track this decline, see the Gallup Poll Web site at <http://poll.gallup.com>.

29. Peace groups such as Human Rights Watch, Refugees International, and Greenpeace—as well as news outlets like Al Jazeera—are quick to condemn any US military action they see as inappropriate.

30. Clausewitz, *On War*, 596. Of note, Clausewitz refers to a specific historical center of gravity on only a few occasions: “For Alexander, Gustavus Adolphus, Charles XII, and Frederick the Great, the center of gravity was their army” (596); and “The center of gravity of France lies in the armed forces and in Paris” (633).

31. Martin Blumenson, “A Deaf Ear to Clausewitz: Allied Operational Objectives in World War II,” *Parameters* 23 (Summer 1993): 16–27.

32. Gen Gordon R. Sullivan and Col James M. Dubik, “War in the Information Age,” US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute pamphlet, 1994, 12.

33. Gen Gordon R. Sullivan and Col James M. Dubik, “Envisioning Future War,” US Army Command and General Staff College pamphlet, 1995, 23.

34. US Army Field Manual 1, *The Army*, June 2005, par. 3–27.

35. US Army Field Manual 3–0, *Operations*, June 2001, par. 1–36.

36. US Marine Corps, Fleet Marine Force Manual 1, *Warfighting*, March 1989, 11.

37. Peters, “In Praise of Attrition,” *Parameters* 34, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 24–32.

38. When thinking about the carnage suffered at Little Round Top and in Pickett’s Charge, one recalls the French general witnessing the charge of the Light Brigade and commenting that “it is magnificent, but it is not war.” Why should such acts be glorified and commemorated?

39. Christopher Bassford traces the influence of Clausewitz in the US Army’s school system in *Clausewitz in English*.

40. Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), *passim*. Contrast this interpretation with that of Harry Summers noted above. Also recall that the Army and Marine Corps fired eight million tons of artillery rounds in South Vietnam—more than *five times* the bomb tonnage dropped on Germany during World War II. And South Vietnam was on our side.

41. For an excellent discussion of how this paradigm succeeded in Afghanistan, see Richard B. Andres, Craig Wills, and Thomas E. Griffith Jr., “Winning with Allies: The Strategic Value of the Afghan Model,” *International Security* 30, no. 3 (Winter 2005/2006): 124–60.

42. Of note, although Afghanistan is larger and more populous than Iraq, the United States sent far less troops there. The result: approximately one-tenth as many United States military personnel have been killed in Afghanistan compared to Iraq. See periodically updated statistics at www.defenselink.mil/news/casualty.pdf.

43. Gen Wesley Clark was reportedly pushed into early retirement after Kosovo because of his erroneous belief that a massive ground invasion of Serbia was necessary to achieve victory. See Peter J. Boyer, “General Clark’s Battles,” *The New Yorker* 79, no. 35 (17 November 2003): 70–88.

44. Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Ruler* (London: The Bodley Head, 1954), 34. For some reason this translation eschewed the more traditional title of *The Prince*, but it is the same book.

45. See, for example, the 28 January 2004 interview with James Fallows, the defense correspondent at the *Atlantic Monthly*, at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages-/frontline/shows/invasion/interviews/fallows.html>. See also the Web site of the Democratic Party that echoes this belief, http://democrats.org/a/2005/08/bush_white_house_1.php.

46. Oops, did the generals forget that military actions are constrained by politics/policy? See Evan Thomas and John Barry, “Anatomy of a Revolt,” *Newsweek* 147, no. 18 (24 April 2006): 28–32; and Michael Duffy, “The Revolt of the Generals,” *Time* 167, no. 17 (24 April 2006): 41–42.

47. See, for example, Thomas E. Ricks, “Officers Question Visibility of Army in Iraq,” *Washington Post*, 26 July 2004, 1; and Greg Jaffe, “As Chaos Mounts in Iraq, U.S. Army Rethinks Its Future,” *Wall Street Journal*, 8 December 2004, 1.

48. For an excellent discussion of how airpower plus special operations forces plus indigenous Kurdish forces overcame 12 Iraqi divisions in northern Iraq, see Richard Andres, “The Afghan Model in Northern Iraq,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 29, no. 3 (June 2006): 395–422.

49. Of note, in testimony before the Senate, then-CENTCOM commander Gen John P. Abizaid stated: “Our long-term strategy in the region will not likely be furthered by the continuing presence of a large U.S. military footprint in the Middle East.” See his testimony from 14 March 2006 online at <http://www.centcom.mil/sites/uscentcom1/Shared%20Documents/PostureStatement2006.htm>. A bit late for such thinking.

50. Clausewitz, *On War*, 487.

51. *Ibid.*, bk. 6. It is surprising that Clausewitz never mentions in his lengthy bk. 6 (“Defense”) the serious impact that guerrillas can have on an occupying army’s supply lines, especially given such effects were demonstrated so dramatically in Spain and Russia against Napoléon’s troops.

52. Regarding the common assertion that Clausewitz would have said this or that had he lived to revise his book, Howard observes that this is “an argument frequently used by admirers of Clausewitz—the present writer not excepted—who find aspects of his work not wholly to their liking.” Clausewitz, *On War*, 33.

53. *Los Angeles Times*, 9 February 2006, 1.

54. Although the Vatican called for a boycott of the film, it has had little effect except, interestingly, in Asia. Similarly, Pope Benedict XVI’s quoting of a medieval predecessor that intoler-

ant and bloody “jihad” was evil raised a vicious outcry among Muslims, with some even calling for Benedict’s assassination.

55. Lest we forget, in February 1989 Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini issued a death sentence against novelist Salman Rushdie, a British citizen, for the alleged crime of blasphemy against Islam. (There was no trial, merely a *fatwa* [decree] handed down by the ayatollah.) The death sentence was confirmed—with a \$3 million bounty to whomever would do the deed—in February 2006 by Iran’s current chief ayatollah, Ali Khamenei. Although Rushdie remains alive and in hiding, several others associated with the publication of his novel, *Satanic Verses*, have been murdered by Muslim fanatics.

56. It should be small consolation to acknowledge that our adversaries are similarly obtuse regarding Americans and the way they think.

57. The translators for each of these editions of Clausewitz’s *On War* are, respectively, J. J. Graham (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1918), 23, and Anatol Rapoport (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1982, ca. 1968), 119; O. J. Matthijs Jolles (New York: Random House, 1943), 16; Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 7, 87; Thomas David Pilcher, *War According to Clausewitz* (London: Cassell, 1918), 13; A. M. E. Maguire, *General Carl von Clausewitz on War* (London: William Clowes and Sons, Limited, 1909), 155; and Gordon Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 180.

58. Bassford, “John Keegan and the Grand Tradition of Trashing Clausewitz,” 326.

59. Peter Paret, *Understanding War: Essays on Clausewitz and the History of Military Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 169.

60. John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York: Knopf, 1993).

61. A similar thesis is advanced by Martin van Creveld. In his *The Transformation of War* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), ix, he writes that “contemporary ‘strategic’ thought . . . is fundamentally flawed; and, in addition, is rooted in a ‘Clausewitzian’ world-picture that is either obsolete or wrong.” Clausewitzian theologians take their religion seriously. In reviewing van Creveld’s book, Harry Summers attacked him as being “known for his ill-manners and overweening arrogance” and who “never heard a shot fired in anger.” *Strategic Review* 19 (Spring 1991): 58–60. Such insults are, of course, in sharp contrast to the demonstrably good manners and modesty of Summers himself.

62. Clausewitz, *On War*, 86.

63. On the other hand, Michael Howard opined, “Fascists regarded war not just as an instrument of policy but as a thoroughly desirable activity in itself.” That would help explain why Britain, France, and the United States had such a difficult time trying to figure Hitler out. Michael Howard, *The Invention of Peace: Reflections on War and International Order* (London: Profile, 2001), 68. I would also note that Adolf Hitler was an admirer of Clausewitz. Indeed, was not Hitler the epitome of the leader who wielded military power for political ends?

64. Elisabeth Rosenthal and David Sanger, “U.S. Plane in China after It Collides with Chinese Jet,” *New York Times*, 2 April 2001, A1; see also <http://cnnstudentnews.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0104/06/wbr.00.html>.

65. The charge that a slow and cumbersome four-engine cargo plane could ram a small, nimble fighter plane that could fly twice as fast is risible.

66. Michael R. Gordon, “A Dangerous Game,” *New York Times*, 3 April 2001, A1. For an excellent and provocative discussion of how China’s culture—fundamentally different from that of the West—impacts its military strategy, see William H. Mott and Jae Chang Kim, *The Philosophy of Chinese Military Culture: Shih vs. Li* (New York: Palgrave and Macmillan, 2006).

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67. Stephen Peter Rosen, *War and Human Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 74.

68. Ibid., 135–36.

69. Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 238.

70. Of course, just because a decision is rational does not mean it is correct. We should not then compound our problems by assuming a rationality in our adversaries that may not exist.

71. My advice is to take the “Jeopardy” approach to Clausewitz: all must be in the form of a question. Thus, ask “under what circumstances and in which cultures is war generally considered a rational act of policy” rather than asserting the condition as being a fact, as is usually the case.